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ESPIONAGE

Files show CIA used psychics to spy on Iran

Help enlisted during hostage crisis to track, monitor U.S. captives

Miami Herald

MIAMI — The dozens of American diplomats taken hostage by revolutionary students who seized the U.S. embassy in Iran in 1979 might have had some secret company during their 15-month captivity: U.S. intelligence agencies had a squad of military-trained psychics using ESP to watch them, according to declassified documents in a newly available CIA database.

In an operation code-named Grill Flame, half a dozen psychics working inside a dimly lit room in an ancient building in Fort Meade, Md., on more than 200 occasions tried to peer through the ether to see where the hostages were being held, how closely they were guarded and the state of their health.

Officially, the psychics worked for U.S. Army intelligence. But the documents in the CIA database make it clear their efforts were monitored — and supported — by an array of government intelligence agencies as well as top commanders at the Pentagon.

They even were consulted before the super-secret U.S. military raid that attempted to free the hostages in April 1980, which ended in disaster when a plane and a helicopter collided at a desert staging area.

In a memo written April 23, 1980, one day before the launch of the rescue mission, one of the chiefs of the psychic unit told a superior officer that a representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had contacted the unit and "requested we intensify our efforts and that we attempt to set to up a situation wherein the possibilities for aborting the mission would be sharply reduced."

Whether the psychics provided any useful intelligence was the subject of a debate among intelligence officials as heated as it was secret.

After the hostages were released in January 1981 and extensively questioned about the details of their experience, the Pentagon compared the information with 202 reports from the Grill Flame psychics.

"Only seven reports" were proved correct, wrote an Air Force colonel on the staff of the Joint Chiefs.

More than half, he added, were "entirely incorrect." And although 59 contained information that was partly or possibly right, the colonel noted that "these same reports often included erroneous data."

Army officers supervising Grill Flame hotly contested the Air Force colonel's evaluation, claiming 45 percent of the psychic reports contained some accurate information. And, they argued, "that was information that could not be obtained through normal intelligence collection channels."

The debate continues today. "The stuff that the CIA has declassified is garbage," one of the Grill Flame psychics, Joseph McMoneagle, told the Miami Herald. "They haven't declassified any of the stuff that worked."